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Research Notes: Hispaniola: The future tourism Destination of the Caribbean?

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Nowadays we refer to Haiti and the Dominican Republic as two different states¹. As alliances and partnership are more and more common between countries in the tourism industry, this paper is going to examine the importance of cooperative strategies between Haiti and the Dominican Republic as a means of gaining some competitive advantages in the overall marketing, planning and development of the destinations.

Tourism is often described as one of the world's largest industries (Cooper and Hall, 2008: 252). When it comes to the Caribbean most people think about sunny, white beach paradise islands, colourful cocktails and lively music. Because the region is very diverse, not all the islands are 'vested in the branding and marketing of paradise' (Sheller, 2004: 23). In fact, Haiti and the Dominican Republic have two different images. On the one hand we have one of the most visited island of the Caribbean (The Dominican Republic), but on the other hand, Haiti, branded as an unsecure destination (Higate and Henry, 2009), a place where the worst is always likely to happen (Bonnet, 2010).

Trying to predict the future trends that can affect the production and consumption of tourism is valuable. From Haiti's and the Dominican Republic's perspective, reflection on the future can enable consideration of how to attract more visitors. But in general, trying to predict what the future will bring has become an important element in tourism management because of the need to try and bring a degree of control and certain to business management processes as well as providing desired returns for destinations (Cooper and Hall, 2008: 348).

¹ Hispaniola used to be one state before it was colonized by the Spaniards, who ceded the western part (now Haiti) to France in 1697 (<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/Hispaniola>)

Historical development of tourism in the Dominican Republic and Haiti

The Dominican Republic is undoubtedly the most striking example of a Caribbean island that hugely benefits from the tourism industry. The Dominican Republic started relatively late in terms of the development of its tourism industry compared to other countries of the Caribbean, mainly due to the political instability of the country during the dictatorship of Trujillo between 1930 and 1961. It was not until 1967 that the Dominican government started to take an interest in the tourism industry as a means of development for the country (Freitag, 1994: 538). By the late 1980s, the tourism industry had become an important source of income for the island (Roessingh et al, 2008: 26). The Dominican Republic receives more than 3 million tourists each year (Van der Sterren, 2008: 42). This eastern part of 'Hispaniola' is now one of the favourite destinations of French people going overseas for their holidays (Villard, 2005: 48-50).

Although the tourist arrivals are continuing to grow in the Dominican Republic there are signs of saturation. There is little room for growth left in the current situation (Roessingh et al, 2008: 29). The government has already started to work on tourism development plans that focus on diversification and competitiveness moving away from promoting traditional sun and beach holidays (Roessingh et al, 2008: 30).

Figure 1: Haiti and the Dominican Republic



Source: © Raimond Spekking / CC-BY-SA-3.0 (via Wikimedia Commons)

The question now for the Dominican Republic is to find a direction to go to, a strategy to implement. Can a partnership with Haiti be a valuable and sensible option?

During the 1950s and 1960s, Haiti was one of the most visited islands of the Caribbean (Dupont, 2004). Back in this time Haiti had a very good image due to its reputation as a cultural destination. In fact, in 1951, the island received 10,788 visitors and in 1956, 67,700 tourists visited the island. The number of tourists had been multiplied by 6 in 5 years (Jules and Laplanche, 2006).

Haiti used to be called the pearl of the Antilles. In 1957, the dictatorship and the terror atmosphere organised by Francois Duvalier and his Tontons Macoutes crippled the tourism industry of the country. When Jean Claude Duvalier became president in the 1972, the situation of the island slightly improved. This period witnessed the inauguration of the 'route de l' Amitié franco-haitienne'² in 1976 and the building of some more hotels like 'La Jacmelienne' and 'Club Mediterranee'. During this period, the number of visitors (mainly from North America and Canada) to Haiti was way ahead of those going to the Dominican Republic which was still mainly known for the production of sugar and rum (Theodat, 2004). In the late 1970s and 1980s things changed drastically for Haiti. During this decade the destination went through a severe economic crisis which developed into a socio-political crisis. Between 1987 and 2004, the number of tourists went from 239.200 in 1987 to 108.868 in 2004, which represents a decrease of more than 54% of the number of visitors in 17 years.

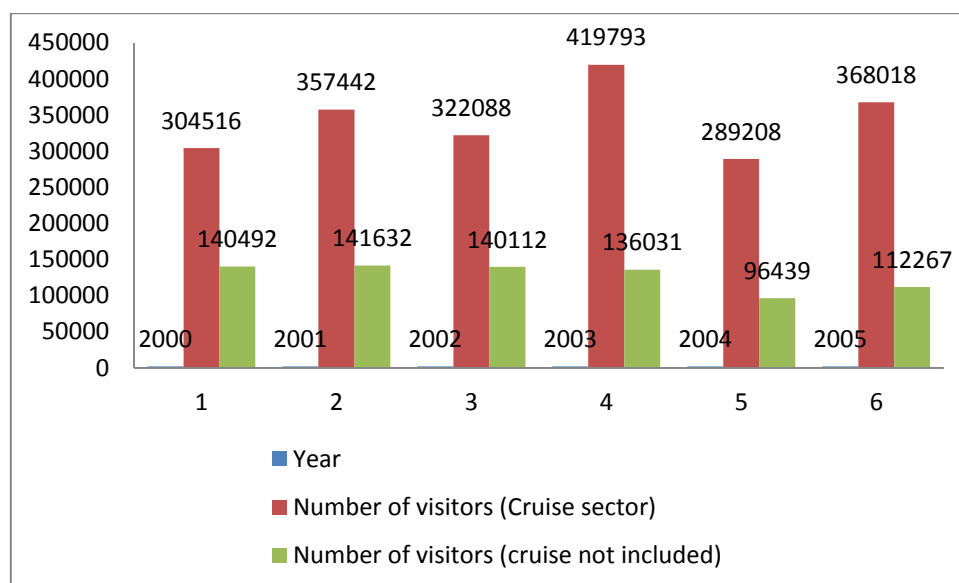
Nowadays, Haiti is one of the less visited islands for three main reasons: The political instability; the climate of insecurity and last but not least, the lack of facilities for tourists. Before the earthquake in January 2011, tourism represented less than 5% of the GDP of the island. Over the years the governments tried many times to give a 'boost' to the tourism industry. In 1995, for instance the government via the

² 'La Route de l'amitié Franco-Haitienne' is a 130 km road between Jacmel and Port-au Prince. Built in 1976, this road aiming to make Jacmel more accessible was financed by the French and Haitian governments. http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/rapport_haiti.pdf

‘Secretariat d’état au tourisme’ (SET) had a master plan for the tourism industry and part of this plan was the development of training and courses in tourism and the rehabilitation of Jacmel because of its strong colonial past, its architecture and its natural environment (Dupont, 2004). All those efforts were destroyed by the island’s political and structural instability and vulnerability.

Haiti has a huge potential regarding the fact that its resources have been hardly used so far because of the political situation of the island. Based on figures, the cruise sector can be considered as one of the key assets for the development of Haiti.

Figure 2: Number of Visitors to Haiti



Source: Priminfo issue 3 - September 6th, 2006

The newly elected president of Haiti, Michel Martelly, is planning to restore a safe environment to encourage visitors back to the country, to promote its heritage and is planning to start again the aborted project called ‘The slave trail’ (Salle, Eluther, 2011). The question is the extent to which a cooperation Haiti / Dominican Republic can be profitable for this latest project.

Alliances and partnerships?

Partnerships are perceived as a search of efficiency within an organizationally fragmented landscape (Lowndes 2001: 1962) as well as presenting new opportunities for uniting additional human and financial resources in order to build the capacity of tourism development (Cooper and Hall, 2007: 154). The notion of partnerships reflects also the ideas that no single organisation or destination is capable of tackling all problems by itself (Bramwell and Lane, 2000). Partnership has therefore become the dominant common sense option (Cooper and Hall, 2007: 155). Among the benefits of collaboration are (Hall, 2000; Dyer and Singh, 1998):

- Response capacity is more diversified
- The potential to discover novel, innovative solutions is enhanced
- Relations between the stakeholders improve
- Matching relation-specific assets (matching specific assets between organisations to gain competitive advantage)
- Integrating complementary resources and capabilities

France, Italy and Spain, the three most visited European countries (more than 180 million visitors all together in 2007) are already working together in order to promote the destinations as one product to long haul outbound destinations particularly Brazil, Russia and China (Revue Espaces, 2009: 5)

Hispaniola: The way forward for Haiti and the Dominican Republic

Due to the fact that both countries share the same physical geographic entity and have a similar political background based on dictatorship, the Dominican Republic can be used as a tourism development model for Haiti. It does not mean that Haiti has to copy the Dominican Republic. Haiti has to show some pragmatism in its approach.

To make its way up as a popular destination the Dominican Republic adopted a certain number of strategies (Patullo, 1996; Villareal and Van der Horst, 2008):

- The enactment of a 'tourist incentive law' which offered tax benefits for private investors who entered the tourism industry
- Allocate land and resources to the industry
- Designate tourist zones

- Attract foreign investors
- All-inclusive resort development model. This concept is however considered to be of little benefit to the local community as many resorts are foreign-owned and there is therefore a high level of leakage.
- Integration of all the stakeholders
- Ensure a secure environment for visitors
- Promotion of the island
- Train the workforce
- Development of facilities
- Create a sound and healthy environment

A partnership can be beneficial for the Dominican Republic as the country is showing some signs of saturation as a sun and beach holiday destination. The Dominican Republic could start promoting itself as a cultural destination. The 'Hispaniola package' can be an interesting option. But whatever direction Haiti and the Dominican Republic are going to choose to go to in order to achieve a sustainable tourism industry that is economically, geographically and socially viable, a partnership between both countries seems to be unavoidable as there is a high risk of duplication.

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